



Recognising and Recording Achievement in Forth Valley and West Lothian: Reflections on Practice from Youth Workers and Young People Participating in Youth Work

Aim of the Project

FVWL RIC wants to support the consistency of recognising and recording young people's personal learning and achievement across schools and CLD providers in Forth Valley and West Lothian.

Activity to Date

Through November and December, YouthLink Scotland's Youth Work and Schools Partnership team, worked alongside Education Scotland staff to undertake structured interviews with youth work practitioners. We explored how youth work managers and their teams currently recognise and record young people's achievements, outwith the formal curriculum, and how they collaborate with school partners to ensure that young people's achievements are recorded and acknowledged across settings. In all, we have interviewed:

- 3x Youth Work Managers / Team Leaders (Falkirk, Stirling and West Lothian)
- A further 12 youth work practitioners working across all 4 local authorities – all so far members of local authority youth work teams, but we hope to visit a few third sector organisations as we continue to gather programme data snapshots over the coming weeks.

We also had the opportunity to meet 3x small groups of young people in West Lothian and Falkirk (just 16 young people in total) to hear about their experiences and explore their ideas about more effectively recognising and recording achievements in the future. We have incorporated their views in the summary below.¹

¹ All of the direct quotes in the document from youth work managers and practitioners, except those expressly attributed to young people.

WHAT IS 'LEARNING AND ACHIEVEMENT'

"Communication – just socialising with different age groups and people – building my confidence to do that is what's helped me the most." **Young Person, West Lothian**

Youth workers and young people agree that the achievements that matter are those that help young people to improve their health and wellbeing, build relationships, develop new skills and prepare them for life beyond school. They most commonly mentioned the following areas of learning and achievement through youth work:

- Emotional wellbeing
- Building self-awareness
- Confidence
- Communication
- Team work
- 'Life skills'
- 'Employability skills'

Interestingly, some of the young people we've talked to also stress the importance of collective achievements as well as individual ones:

"Keeping on getting together as a group is a big [achievement]" **Young Person**

"Helping each other is an achievement" **Young Person**

Youth Work / SQA Awards

Youth workers value the focus and structure offered by youth awards and SQA accredited qualifications to support learning and achievement. Across the group of practitioners interviewed, at least 10 award programmes are currently being offered:

- Hi5
- Dynamic Youth x 2
- Youth Achievement
- Duke of Edinburgh
- Achieve Programme – The Prince's Trust
- Saltire
- John Muir
- Participative Democracy Certificate
- Personal Development Level 5 (SQA)
- Wellbeing Level 4/5 (SQA)

However, youth workers are clear that the accreditation or award is a secondary benefit. And whilst awards and qualifications are a straightforward way to record and recognise achievement, practitioners stress practitioners agree that other approaches are needed too:

"We only use accredited learning where it's appropriate – gaining accreditation is never the purpose – it's primarily about the skills."

“Sometimes, especially in the early stages of relationships, gathering evidence for awards changes the energy of activities and conversations. It’s important that the young people – and the youth workers’ relationships with the young people - are ready for this.”

Building a Shared Understanding of Learning and Achievement through Youth Work

In most schools settings, youth workers are seeing a positive shift in school perspectives on achievement through youth work:

“Schools are getting better at recognising the benefits of youth work.”

“Schools are accepting that the journey in youthwork is part of attainment.”

A few youth work practitioners expressed frustration that school partners are still failing to recognise the potential for positive learning and achievement through youth work:

“You sometimes feel like we’re being asked by the schools to go in and patch over the cracks, and they don’t engage as we’d like in conversations about learning goals and attainment.”

“For schools, the focus is on school attendance – I’ve got a young person who won’t attend school but will meet me for a walk and a conversation. That’s attendance, but the school won’t recognise it as anything.”

And all of the youth workers agreed that, in their experience, schools are still most likely to recognise and value young people’s achievements through youth work when they result in awards or Insight tariff points:

“It’s been a journey for schools to recognise non-accredited attainment”

“Schools tend to focus on SQA tariff points”

“There’s too much focus on stats.”

Youth workers believe they help young people to notice and value a much wider range of personal achievements:

“When they start work with us, young people really struggle to articulate their skills and qualities – fourth and fifth years can’t articulate these. It takes weeks to bring that out of them. I think in youth work we’re quite good at helping young people recognise these, whereas it’s not common practice in education.”

Both youth workers and young people say that some of the most important steps that young people take in youth work – especially early in their youth work journey – are acknowledged and celebrated in a youth work setting, but would not be seen as achievements in other contexts:

“Schools put young people’s big achievements on the wall, but they focus on attainment.”

“In youth work, we take a person by person view of achievement – small things that actually make a big difference. So for one [young person], that might be

catching the bus for the first time, for another it might be attending an employability service at a venue they have never been to before.”

“Sometimes small wins can be big wins. If you are really struggling, just getting out of bed to get to a group is difficult. Sometimes just turning up is the achievement.” **Young Person**

“There’s no way before I came to this group that I’d be confident to share my opinions in a group, and with someone who is a complete stranger. But that’s not a big thing, is it – like most people would consider that a bare minimum kind of confidence?” **Young Person**

HOW DO YOUTH WORKERS SUPPORT YOUNG PEOPLE TO RECOGNISE THEIR LEARNING AND ACHIEVEMENTS?

Youth workers build trust that enables honest, open conversations about progress

“Youth workers build relationships that support these conversations with young people.”

“Building relationships and trust first, then help them build confidence to talk about themselves.”

Youth workers are trained to gather careful observations of young people’s progress

“Staff observe and offer young people feedback in the moment, at the end of sessions and during reflective conversations”

Youth workers are skilled at structuring and facilitating reflective learning opportunities for young people in a range of creative ways

“Youth workers help young people to tell the story of the skills and qualities they are developing on their youth work journey.”

“Helping young people translate their achievements for CVs and job interviews.”

“Support to reflect on work placements – learning from what the things that don’t work as well as the things that do.”

“Conversations and worksheets to explore and understand skills and qualities young people have and are developing”

“Setting learning agreements and goals with young people at the beginning of programmes and regularly checking in on progress with individual young people and as a group.”

“Regular reflective conversations between young person and youth worker to articulate the progress they are making”

Youth workers encourage and enable young people to build reflective learning habits (the structure of youth awards also helps with this)

“Journaling”

“Taking photographs to piece together the learning journey”

“A weekly rhythm of journals and post-it note reflections”

“My Journey” within the Prince’s Trust’s Achieve award

Youth workers celebrate young people’s individual and collective successes

“Celebrations of achievement events”

“Personalised statements of achievement at the end of programmes”

“Recognising skills development with a youth work ‘report card’ outlining achievements – young people can take something positive home that shines a light on their strengths and the progress they are making”

“Feedback in the moment, at the end of sessions”

“Award certificates”

“In-house certificates that recognise the distance young people have travelled”

“Peer reflections on progress”

“Additional ‘witness statements’ from someone outside the group”

However, youth workers recognise that this is work in progress – and can be challenging, particularly with some of the most vulnerable young people., or for young people in the early stages of the youth work journey where relationships are still being established

“I think we are getting better at capturing the journey. But it can be difficult. Young people can be really chaotic.”

How do youth workers work collaboratively with schools to help young people recognise their learning and achievements through youth work?

Whilst all recognition by schools of young people’s achievements through youth work is welcomed by youth workers, practitioners particularly value opportunities to facilitate conversations between young people and teachers to explore learning and achievement:

“Increasingly schools are providing feedback on the changes they see in young people”

“Some head teachers present young people with participation certificates that are recognised in school.”

“It works best in school settings when reflective discussions about progress and achievements happen with school staff and young people are able to vocalise their achievements to school staff themselves”

HOW DO YOUTH WORKERS GATHER AND RECORD EVIDENCE OF LEARNING AND ACHIEVEMENTS?

How do management information systems help?

Youth work teams record information on a range of management information systems:

- Cognisoft
- FORT
- On the Button
- Schools use SEEMiS and decisions about youth worker access to SEEMiS are generally made at school level. Even where youth workers have access, SEEMiS tends to be used as a source of information to inform youth work programme recruitment, rather than to record evidence of learning and achievement via youth work.

Views on the efficacy of community-based systems vary, but currently only very basic data about young people's learning and achievement is stored here – most are limited to participant numbers and demographics, and gathering data on youth work awards.

“It currently takes a lot of effort to interpret data. Cognisoft is a clunky system but we are doing work to make it more user-friendly”

“The FORT system is relatively new but it can gather information across community settings”

“We need to create a more intelligent system– we'll be working on this over the next year or so”

“I think we get caught up in the doing rather than the recording.”

All agree that the fact that the systems are separate from SEEMiS is a challenge – both for recording and sharing data

“Management information systems don't talk to each other”

“There are challenges around ownership of data which make it difficult to share”

How do evaluation frameworks help?

- Falkirk uses Outcomes Star for some programmes
- Stirling and West Lothian are beginning to connect evaluations to the refreshed National Youth Work Outcomes and Skills Framework.

Other research and evaluation methods

- Falkirk has taken part in transformative evaluation research – where young people's stories of 'most significant change' are gathered and coded to understand the impact of youth work and how this impact comes about.

Partnership approaches to recording young people's learning and achievements

Youth workers agree that, whilst there would be a real value in building a whole picture of young people's learning and achievement across settings (local authority youth work / third sector youth work / other community organisations) this only happens very informally at the moment

"We're not really working together to record progress and achievements."

"Some of our outdoor learning programmes are closely linked with countryside rangers ..so we're linking up on delivery, but not gathering data collaboratively."

"We do work with third sector partners so some information is shared informally, through colleague relationships"

"We do always try to find out what young people are doing and achieving in different places – it helps us understand what they might need."

"There are joint review conversations in some targeted work."

There is a partnership network and a youth work network but we don't share data or / information in any systematic / formal way.

"Stirling Youth Support Providers Forum is exploring how best to capture and share data across organisations."

There are some positive examples of joint recording and collaborative reviews between youth work and school:

"Shared records are kept on a shared [On the Button] system. Reviews and school improvement planning are worked on together."

but diverse lines of communication and separate management information systems leave many youth workers feeling that sharing data on learning and achievement is a 'one way flow of information'. A number express frustration that there is no feedback on what they submit, and no clarity about where it goes or how it is reviewed.

"Communication with schools – both in terms of goal-setting and reviewing achievements is patchy and slow."

"We need to improve communication between schools and community including youth work."

"It's difficult to follow young people's journey through youth work and school"

"There's no single point of contact in school [to review young people's progress and achievements with] – we have to chase after multiple different guidance staff to be able to have the conversations we do have."

"It's a different point of contact in every school- in primary schools it's headteachers. In some secondaries it's a pupil support lead, or someone in a designated role for partnership working. "

"We're recording the progress young people are making but teachers probably don't get to hear about that. Imagine if young people involved in our cooking programme has the opportunity to talk about their achievements with Hospitality / Health and Food Technology teachers – it would really help to change perceptions and enable young people to build on what they are learning"

"There a wide range of approaches to sharing evidence of impact. In some schools the onus is on youth workers to send in evidence of impact to school"

SLT / a key link person/pastoral care team in school, but it's not clear where this is recorded."

"I send information to the rector but I have no idea where the information goes"

"Reports sharing what young people are learning and achieving are submitted to schools. I'm not sure if the schools even read the reports, let alone connect with young people."

"The collaborative conversation about the 'so what' for the young person doesn't happen."

"The schools only follow up on awards."

Youth work achievements that happen outside of school are not being recorded in school, but youth workers recognise that not all young people would want this to happen, even if systems allowed it:

"some young people would not want these recorded in school – for them, the point is that it is not school. If this information is going to be shared it would need to be the young person's choice. ."

IDEAS FOR BETTER WAYS TO RECOGNISE AND RECORD YOUNG PEOPLE'S ACHIEVEMENTS THROUGH YOUTH WORK

Youth workers are clear that it is important for young people to recognise achievements that are not recognised through formal SQA qualifications:

"Sometimes the only accreditations young people are leaving school with are youth awards – it matters that these are recorded."

"For many of the young people we work with, the youth work they access in school is the only thing they do."

Youth workers feel strongly that this record of achievements should be 'owned' by young people themselves. The young people we've spoken to in this process so far say that they would be happy for the record to be shared across settings, as long as they are also able to see, and give permission for, what is being shared.

"Young people should get to decide the achievements that matter to them."

Youth workers say that a common language and structure for recording achievement would be helpful

"We need a clear structure for gathering data– like the Youth Work Outcomes and Skills Framework – could help to flag up achievements more."

What kind of record would work best:

"Something visual – an online resource where young people could store information about their journey in different formats."

“Seeing [achievements] written down doesn’t always mean as much to young people as hearing peers / youth workers / teachers talk about the changes they have seen young people make.”

“A digital record – could include video; voice recording; social media posts; images. Young people record their journey, their reflections – but they can also choose who else they invite in to add their observations on the progress they see young people making – giving examples and feedback.”

“I like analog -a notebook / certificates / trophies / stickers – something I can hold.” **Young Person**

“Contributions from peers”

“Individual highlights, as observed by youth workers.”

“Something that young people would feel motivated to complete.”

“How this is communicated is key – need to be understood to be of equal relevance to achievements with tariff points attached.”

SO WHAT?

There is work to do to build a clearer shared understanding of dimensions of achievement through youth work – with young people, youth work colleagues, formal educators and parents

- A common framework and language for describing and recording achievement would be valuable.
- It needs to make sense and feel motivating for young people.
- Perhaps the National Youth Work Outcomes and Skills Framework could provide a basis for this?
- Youth workers and young people also eloquently describe the small but important steps that young people may make in the early stages of their youth work journey, as they build relationships to support learning. How can we best recognise and record these early achievements too? How can we encourage formal educators to value these in the same way that young people and youth workers do?

Flexible connected systems that make it easier to gather, collate and aggregate rich data about young people’s achievements across a range of settings are needed

- Can we make it simpler for practitioners to record a range of achievements, and the evidence that underpins these, on management information systems?
- Can we enable community based management information systems to talk to school-based systems?
- Can we use digital technology to enable young people to easily see all the related threads of their individual learning journey in one place?

It's important to continue to build young people's confidence and motivation to 'own' and record their own learning journey and achievements

- How do we do this in an equitable and accessible way that is inclusive of all young people?

Recognising and recording achievement is not just an end in itself. Doing it well will provide insights that inform young people, youth workers, formal educators and policy-makers about individual learning pathways, curriculum development and service improvement.